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Gender and Political Leadership: Moving Beyond Stereotypes

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This short paper suggests that the categories of ‘transformational’ and ‘transactional’ leadership styles (see Burns 1972) may provide analytical purchase on the question of whether current women leaders have radically different styles and approaches to the earlier second wave feminist generation. The two cases chosen for this paper are the senior women in the Labor and Liberal Parties – Julia Gillard and Julie Bishop. The evidence – explored below – indicates there are strong transactional qualities to both women leaders. One of the paradoxes here is that the literature on transformational leadership styles suggests there is an advantage to being a female leader. Simply put: the ‘relationship-orientation’ style of the transformational model may somehow advantage women, while allowing them to ‘fulfil gender role expectations’ (Manning 2002:208). While the literature on gender and political leadership has not used this language of ‘transformation’ it has nonetheless used proxy language, indicative of change, value orientation and the politics of conviction. For example, recent surveys of gender and politics research (e.g. Childs and Krook 2006) examine the representational roles of women leaders; based on a distinction between symbolic and substantive representation. Other scholars, such as Manon Tremblay (2005), distinguish between feminist and non-feminist women leaders – drawing upon an older strand of research concerning the impact of women leaders. Still others have observed the distinctions between the women politicians of the 1970s/1980s era, as compared with those of the subsequent decades; especially in terms of a declining interest in the feminist agenda. A related strand concerns the depiction of women leaders as ‘conviction’ politicians, irrespective of the content of their value systems – here mention could be made of leaders as diverse as Margaret Thatcher, Pauline Hanson and Sarah Palin.

This short paper suggests that while such observations and issues are interesting there is a need to develop a more systematic approach, which can also be problematical given the small sample size of the category. . We also note that transformational leadership presents as ‘nurturing’, ‘inclusive’, and as guided by an overarching vision. Transactional leadership, in contrast, presents as focused on the immediate deal, and as being practical and pragmatic. While

values are not absent they are sublimated. However, we have also noticed that some male political leaders would meet those ‘transformational’ criteria (e.g. Bob Hawke and Bill Clinton); whilst more than a few women leaders would not. Manning (2002:208) notes that there may even be something ‘androgynous’ about the transformational style. Yet Helen Clark’s style was more independent, individualistic and highly practical or pragmatic (see Simms 2008) At this point we also note the future possibilities of applying a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to a small number of leaders.

Lyons’ (1997) detailed study of Bill Clinton applies a MBTI frame and argues that Clinton presented as a classic extrovert, intuitive, feeling, perceiving (ENFP) type. Lyons also notes that the use of MBTI is supported by its parallels with other widely utilised models, such as ‘authoritarianism’ or ‘rigidity’ (equating with a high score on the MBTI judging scale); and transactional versus transformational matching the dichotomy between Introverted, Sensate, Thinking, Judging (ISTJ) and ENFP types. The gender dimension here is that the category of feeling is more associated with women; and being intuitive and perceiving tending also to be more associated with women, although not as strongly as feeling. Lyons also notes that the use of MBTI is supported by its parallels with other models, such as ‘authoritarianism’ or ‘rigidity’ (equating with a high score on the MBTI judging scale)

Our hypothesis is that the ‘new’ generation of women leaders presented in this paper may show signs of a classic ISTJ type, perhaps in contrast to some of the first generation of women leaders on the political left, e.g. Susan Ryan, Joan Kirner and Carmen Lawrence who wore their hearts on their sleeves politically speaking –were more like a ENFP type. This shift in type is also related to a move away from an explicit feminist agenda – although we do note Julia Gillard’s low key homage to Joan Kirner through her donning of spotted outfits. The issue as to why such leaders are coming to the fore or why there is a demand for them is a larger question for another paper.

This paper explores the way in which Julia Gillard and Julie Bishop from the Australian parliament operate within the current parliamentary system and seek to demonstrate leadership within the party and the country.

Julia Gillard’s rise to become Prime Minister came as no surprise to her colleagues who viewed her as smart and pragmatic. She herself has always seen

politics as genderless and the development of a feminist agenda as merely a sideline to the “real action”. Her own pursuit of the Industrial Relations Policy, a key portfolio in a Labor government which had won an election on such a platform is further evidence of her pragmatic approach to the way in which politics is played and where the ‘real ‘ power lies. A further reinforcement of this approach is seen in her appointment of Penny Wong as Finance Minister. This approach emphasises the fact that for Julia Gillard there was no time to change the practices and processes of political life and give them a more ‘nurturing’ approach, but rather the necessity to succeed dictated that success in the leadership role would come by demonstrating her total command of the more traditional skills of the politician.

Hence, Julia Gillard’s domination of the parliamentary arena during the Rudd years is further evidence of her transactional approach. She could excel at the work required and her colleagues elevated her to the leadership when the chance came – she had proved herself as a politician in the traditional mould – difficult pre-selection in a ‘safe’ seat after three attempts, outstanding performer in the parliament, and mastery of a difficult and economically important portfolio which had dealings with the ‘big business end of town’.

However, Julia Gillard wishes to be seen as a values politician in the traditional Labor mould. On more than one occasion she has declared that Education is ‘her passion’ and the key to the creation of a more fair and just society by enabling people to enter the workforce and enjoy economic independence. This is her transaction with society – people are required to work and make a commitment not only to themselves but to the wider community with the government as the facilitator. She is simple and direct and the policy maker. For her there is no ‘dressing up’ or being all things to all people – she has her role and it is to ensure that policies are developed and implemented.

It is in this role of negotiator that Julia Gillard is most clearly defined as a transactional leader. Her ability to win over the Independents and so form government is her greatest achievement. Even her opponents concede that she demonstrated superior skills in this area. She has continued this work and also negotiated with the Greens (something which her predecessor Kevin Rudd flatly refused to do). Further evidence of such high order skills are in her dealings with state governments, the mining industry and more recently on the

international stage attempting to establish a regional processing centre for asylum seekers.

While current research (Crawford 2008) suggests that it is still women who must accommodate their gender if they are to be real politicians, Julia Gillard has rejected such notions. She has stated who she is – single, childless, and atheist, living with a man to whom she is not married- and seeks to be judged on the way she performs her work as a politician. In this way she is traditional as she seeks to be recognised in similar terms to those by which we judge male politicians, notwithstanding the foray into the *Australian Women's Weekly*. She has continued to ignore demands and comments made about her marital state and her domestic abilities and remains focussed on what she considers to be her role – leading the Australian government and seeking to be evaluated on that. In that sense, she may well be transforming the way her male colleagues view her and other female politicians. In the final analysis Julia Gillard is the ultimate negotiator who has succeeded by understanding the parameters of what it means to be a politician and pursuing the skills to the ultimate where she can no longer go unnoticed and is elevated to the leadership position.

On the other hand, Julie Bishop, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition would seem to accept the dilemma faced by many female politicians. They cannot be seen to be too masculine or they will not be a 'real' woman but then they also cannot be 'real' politicians.(Crawford 2008).Her images suggest she wishes to be seen as a 'real woman' – feminine and compliant. She has been Deputy to Brendan Nelson, Malcolm Turnbull and now Tony Abbott. She is perceived as the 'token' woman – someone who is not a threat. She was even prepared to resign from the Shadow Treasury in circumstances less debilitating than those created by Joe Hockey while recognising that power emanates from the economic policy arena.

Such actions also suggest a transactional politician but this is someone who is prepared to trade whatever is necessary to continue in the Deputy Position to gain favour from her male colleagues. This would seem to imply that she is someone whose ability to lead is predicated on using her feminine wiles to maintain her position rather than act as a serious player by demonstrating key skills. This seems to be at odds with findings (Crawford 2008) that suggest may women politicians find this focus on them as individuals and their identity as a

politician tied to their appearance, especially by the media, counterproductive and the very opposite of what happens to men whose identity as politicians is not questioned irrespective of how they may look.

Julie Bishop's performance in the House demonstrates this less than serious approach – her famous 'catty' gestures to Julia Gillard further exemplified this pursuit of feminine practices as did the 'death stare' during the election campaign. Such actions reveal someone whose grasp of the parliamentary process is limited to ensuring there is a woman on the Opposition front bench but this is someone who does not aspire to the top leadership position, unlike Julia Gillard. While Julie Bishop continues to highlight her visibility as a woman, this subjects her to scrutiny that is not applied to her male colleagues.

In conclusion, what has emerged is that both of these women favour a more transactional approach to leadership. However, what is transacted and how this is developed has serious consequences and may or may not lead to top leadership positions. What does emerge is an individualistic style where women in politics make pragmatic decisions and are dissuaded from pursuing a feminist agenda. For both, the path to success lies in developing more traditional skills – for Julie Bishop these are deference and a willingness to be visible and less important than male colleagues, while for Julia Gillard it is to be the outstanding performer of political skills and hence not be overlooked for the top leadership position - Prime Minister.

Both women demonstrate a more pragmatic approach than earlier female politicians who clung to a more feminist agenda and in the process were sidelined from the powerful decisions of the day. Hence the emergence of a more individualistic and transactional approach as women seek to gain leadership in the powerful political arena.

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